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THE PEARL FISHERS OF TORRES STRAITS ISLANDS

By THOMAS J. McMAHON

The islands of Torres Straits, directly north of Queensland, Australia, vary in size from a mere patch of sand or coral to fifty square miles in area. Only the larger ones are inhabited, the islets being used either as fishing stations or, if the soil is fertile, for native gardens.

THE ISLANDERS

Thirty years ago the fortune hunters of the world realized the worth of the Torres Straits pearls, and a rush set in to rake the bottom of the shallow sea. This brought many unscrupulous adventurers, who began to exploit the Torres Straits islanders, finally bringing them into slavery and almost to the point of extinction. The men were seized and kept almost constantly at work as divers; the women were scattered; separation from home and children ensued. Thus, with broken hearts and weakened bodies, a once high-spirited people succumbed to sickness, famine, and disease. About this time the evils of the industry came to the notice of the Queensland Government. The "Aborigines Protection Act" was passed to check any further ill-treatment of the natives. The "protectors," as the government inspectors were called, assisted by the missionaries of the London Missionary Society, began to encourage and enforce humanitarian ideas. As a result of these reforms, the natives are today a highly industrious, intelligent, and thriving people. Both men and women are tall, with regular, well-formed features that have attracted the attention of travelers and scientists. Their high state of moral and physical vigor is reflected in the fact that they are self-supporting. They not only support their families, their sick, and their aged, but also maintain without government aid their own institutions, such as municipal boats, churches, and schools. Sources of revenue are found in the main industries of the islands, in pearl-ing, and the collecting of *bêche de mer*. The Government merely pays the teachers, the white administrators of the islands.

From the nature of their industries the islanders are born seamen, with an instinctive knowledge of the coral reefs and the movements of the uncertain winds for which the Straits are noted. No white man can take a lugger through the tidal rips and many other dangerous places around the islands with the ease and nonchalance of the native, who is remarkable for the skill with which he handles a swiftly speeding lugger, turning her within her own length in order to avoid some reef visible only to his keen eyes. The Straits are full of wrecks occasioned by foolhardy attempts of other navigators to sail the treacherous waters with their hidden coral reefs and complex tides and currents.

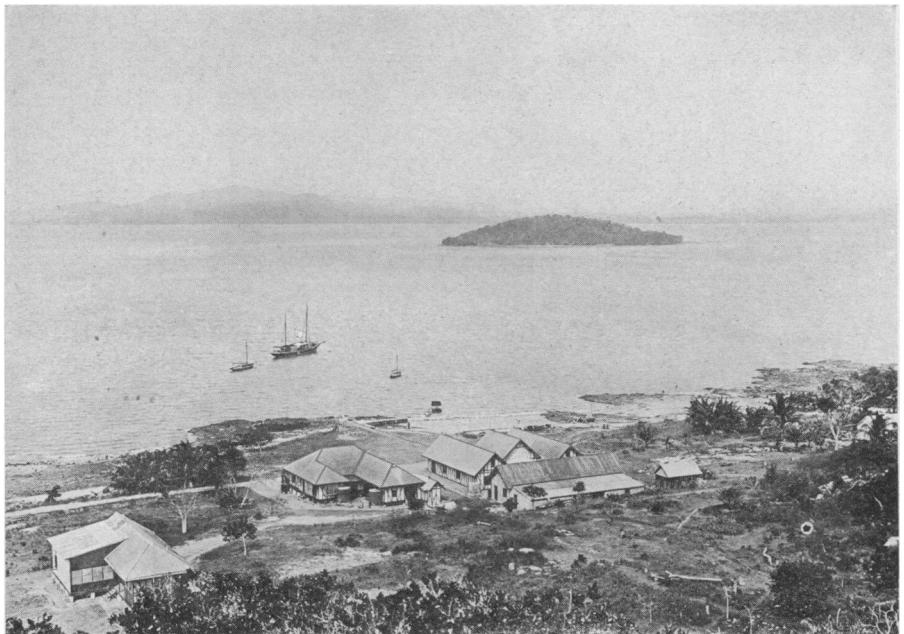


FIG. 1

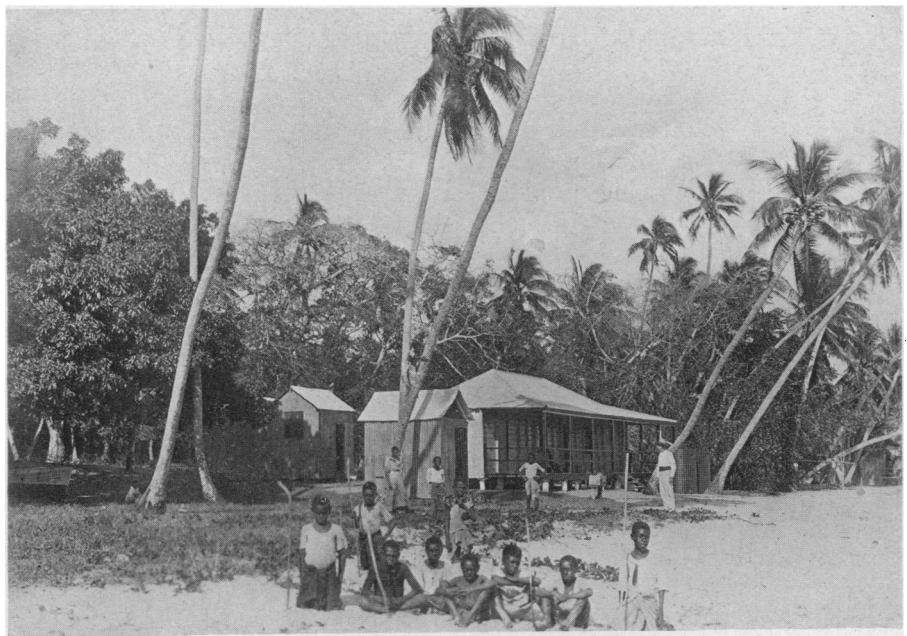


FIG. 2

FIG. 1—A pearl station in the Torres Straits Islands.

FIG. 2—The white administrator's home, Murray Island, Torres Straits.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VARIOUS ISLANDS

Every island has features of particular interest in its history, its people, its scenic beauty, or its scientific importance. Mulgrave Island, more generally known as Badu, is famous for the prosperity of its people and their ready adoption of old English dances taught them by English missionaries many years back. The women make a most beautiful lace of fine quality. Mabuiag Island is distinguished by a remarkable native festival held every five years, to which natives flock from all parts of the group. This festival, once notorious as a gathering of warriors indulging in many savage rites often resulting in massacres, is now an interesting affair under the auspices of the Anglican Mission.

Yorke Island is noted for its history. It was off its palm-bordered shores that Spanish ships sailed hundreds of years ago. Many were wrecked in the coral-strewn waters, and to this day the sea is constantly giving up strange cannon, guns, swords, and old coins. The island was the home of "Yankee Ned," an American sailor who fled from his ship of war, amassed a great fortune in pearls, and married no less than eight native wives leaving numerous descendants.

Darnley Island has amazing native fish traps. These completely encircle the island and are in all sorts of figures, shapes, and sizes. They are made of gigantic boulders. It is difficult to see how they were brought into place. The natives have a tradition that the traps were made by great black giants who used the Islands of the Torres Straits as stepping-stones from Australia to Asia and were in the habit of picking up and throwing at each other in play these boulders, some at least 3 to 4 tons in weight. The natives account for the shapes of the traps by saying that the giants threw handfuls of boulders at one another and that they formed the squares, circles, and figures of eight.

Murray Island and its immediate waters are well known to scientists from all parts of the world. Owing to the various colors of the coral the effect of the sun shining on the sea is extraordinarily beautiful. Murray Island is also termed "The Garden Isle" for its beauty of hills, golden shores, native villages, and the profusion and variety of tropical plant life. Thursday Island, the capital of the group, is an important outpost of the British Empire inasmuch as its forts dominate the narrow straits through which steamers pass.

All of the island villages have strict health regulations. The result is freedom from epidemics. The native councilors, easily distinguishable by the word "Councilor" in white letters on the front of their red jerseys, are men of fairly high intelligence and strong personality. They are either elected by the people, or, in the case of a deadlock of votes, appointed by the administrator. It is part of their many duties to see that the villagers keep their houses, food, and clothing clean, that they send their children regularly to school, and that church is attended. They also visit the native gardens to see that they are properly tilled, and planted to their full capacity.